

Introduction

Perception can be defined as the awareness of things through our five senses – sight, sound, touch, taste and smell. These are ‘the gates and windows’ of the mind – channels of communication between ourselves and the outside world, which effortlessly present us with the rich, and often pleasurable, variety of the world: the beautiful colours of a New England autumn, the sound of waves breaking on a shore, the tickle of a feather, the taste of hot soup on a cold day, the smell of freshly cut grass.

? If for some reason you had to sacrifice one of your senses, which would you be most willing to lose and which would you be least willing to lose? Give reasons.

When people are asked this question, the great majority say that they would be most willing to lose their sense of smell, and least willing to lose their sight. This is not very surprising; indeed we are such visually oriented creatures that vision is sometimes identified with knowledge. For example, we say that seeing is believing rather than smelling is believing; when we understand someone we say ‘I see what you mean’, not ‘I smell what you mean’; and we speak of someone having *insight* not *insmell*.

? Can you give any other examples of figures of speech in English, or any other language, that connect knowledge and the senses?

Smell, by contrast, is the poor relation of the senses, and it is sometimes called the mute sense. For, while we have many different words for colours, our smell vocabulary does not extend much beyond ‘smells good’, ‘smells bad’ and ‘smells like’. Despite its lowly status, we are in fact able to distinguish more than ten thousand different odours. And our sense of smell has a more direct route to our brains than any of our other senses. This may explain why evocative smells can sometimes trigger powerful emotional memories, and why the perfume industry is worth millions of dollars a year.

Allowing that there may be differences in the relative importance we attach to each of our senses, most people would agree that our five senses are important sources of knowledge. Indeed, according to one major school of philosophy, known as **empiricism**, *all* knowledge is ultimately based on perceptual experience. This may be too extreme, but perception clearly plays a key role in almost all subject areas, ranging from the sciences through history to the arts. Think, for example, of the role played by observation in biology, or eye-witness accounts in history, or the ability to see things with new eyes in the visual arts.



Do you think that perception is a more important source of knowledge in some subjects rather than others? Are there any areas of knowledge in which it plays no role?

As a preliminary point of reference, let us consider the position known as **common-sense realism**. According to this, perception is a passive and relatively straightforward process which gives us an accurate picture of reality. Colours and sounds and smells exist ‘out there’, and the act of observation does not affect what is observed. This view of the relation between perception and the world is probably adequate for dealing with the practical demands of everyday life; for if our senses were not generally reliable, we would probably not have survived as a species.

Nevertheless, in what follows I shall argue that there is more to perception than meets the eye, and that it is a more active process than common-sense realism allows. Rather than our senses passively reflecting an independent reality, our experience of the world is affected not only by what is ‘out there’, but also by the structure of our sense organs and our minds.

Perceptual illusions

Despite the ease with which we perceive the world, perception is a complex process in which many things are going on ‘under the bonnet’ of conscious awareness. Simplifying somewhat, I think it can usefully be thought of as consisting of two distinct elements:

- *sensation*, which is provided by the world, and
- *interpretation*, which is provided by our minds.

In everyday life, we are not usually aware of our minds interpreting the sensations that flood into our senses, and we simply experience the familiar world of tables and chairs and cats and dogs and family and friends. A good way of becoming explicitly aware of such interpretations is to look at some visual illusions. In what follows we will look at four kinds of visual illusion, all of which arise not from sensations as such, but from the interpretation we put on them.

Context

The way we see something depends partly on the context in which we see it. Look at the three men in Figure 4.1. While the figure on the right looks a lot bigger than

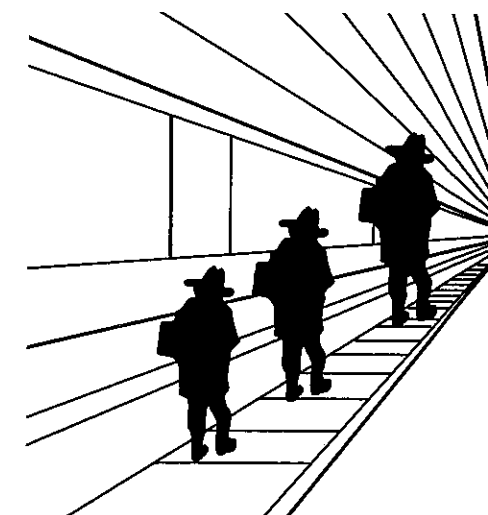


Figure 4.1

the figure on the left, the reality is that they are both the same size. How can we explain this illusion? Well, it has something to do with perspective. Relative to the background, the man on the left is small and the man on the right is big.

In everyday life, we are constantly making such contextual judgements without being consciously aware of it. If you look at Figure 4.2 and focus on the figure on the left and the figure in the middle, they appear to be two normal-sized people, one some distance away and the other in the foreground. However, the two-dimensional 'reality' is that the figure originally on the left is much smaller than the one in the middle – as can be clearly seen when it is moved to the right of the picture.

What both of the above illusions illustrate is that we usually judge the size of an object by looking at the overall context.

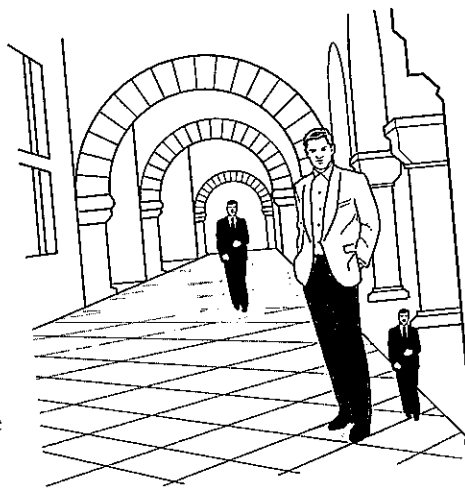


Figure 4.2

Figure and ground

When we look at something, we tend to highlight certain aspects of what we see ('figure'), and treat other parts of it as background ('ground'). For example, when you look at a page of writing, the black parts stand out and you pay no attention to the white background. Sometimes we can make different aspects of what we see stand out as the figure. This is best illustrated by the well-known Rubin face/vase illusion. Figure 4.3 can be interpreted either as a beautiful symmetrical vase, or as two identical silhouettes looking at one another.

There are many examples of ambiguous figures which rely on the figure-ground phenomenon. If you try

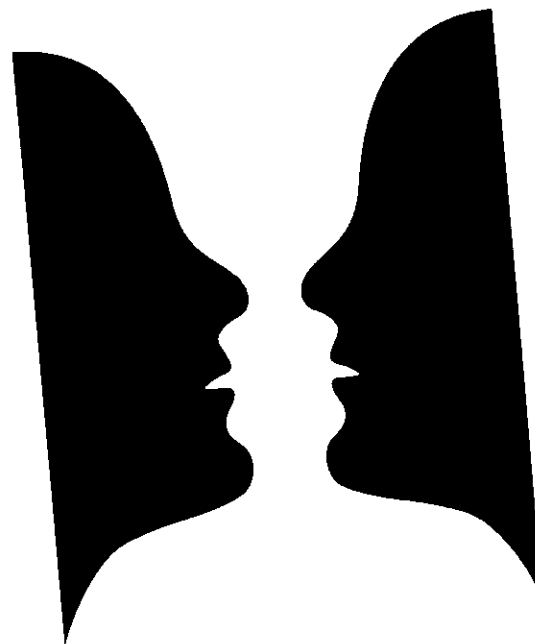


Figure 4.3

slightly blurring your vision, you should be able to find two different interpretations of each of the pictures below.



Figure 4.4 Young man–old man



Figure 4.5 Young woman–old woman

Visual grouping

We have a natural tendency to look for meaning in what we see and to group our perceptual experiences together into shapes and patterns. If you look at Figure 4.6, you have no difficulty in seeing a dog. What is striking is how little information is actually given to us – just a few patches of black. But our minds have no difficulty in filling in the missing parts to create a meaningful picture.

In some cases, however, it can be more difficult to find any meaning in what we see. The first time people see Figure 4.7 they are usually unable to make any sense of it. (If you want to know what this is, look at page 102).



Figure 4.6

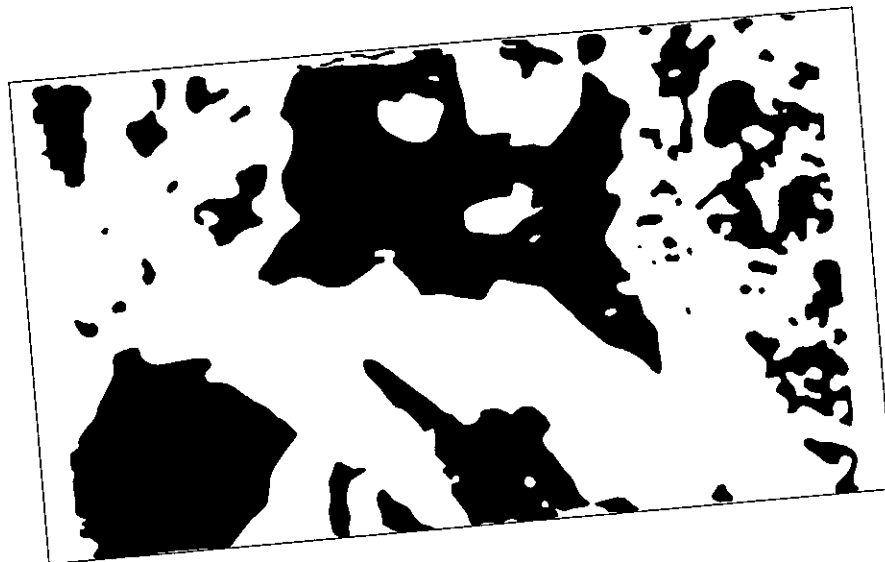


Figure 4.7

Expectations

Our expectations can also influence how we see things. For example, in a well-known experiment, people were asked to identify playing cards that were briefly flashed before them. However, irregular cards, such as a red six of Spades or a black nine of Diamonds were included in the pack. When people saw an irregular card, most of them misperceived it in accordance with their expectations. For example, the red six of Spades was seen as either a regular six of Diamonds or a regular six of Spades.

You might think *you* would not make such a mistake, but look at Figure 4.8 and read the message contained in it.

If you have not seen this before, you probably read 'Paris in the spring', but it actually says 'Paris in the *the* spring'. When you look again you may think to yourself 'How could I have missed that second "the"?' The reason, of course, is that, since you did not expect to see two 'the's in a row, your mind simply blanked out one of them. If you think how difficult it is to spot your own typing errors, then you can see that this kind of perceptual error is far from uncommon.

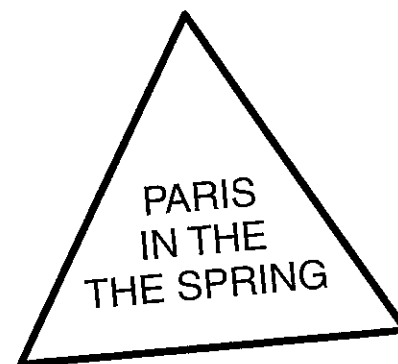


Figure 4.8

While we can experience many other kinds of illusion, the examples of the role played by context, figure-ground, visual grouping and expectations should be enough to convince you that there is an important element of interpretation built into our perception of the world.



We suffer not only from visual illusions, but also from illusions with each of our other senses. Can you give some examples of illusions with hearing, touch, taste and smell?

The role of the unconscious

According to psychologists, many of the interpretations we routinely make about the world happen at an unconscious level. When you look at something what actually appears on your retina are two small inverted two-dimensional images. Yet, without any conscious effort on your part, you see one life-size right-way-up three-dimensional world.

In an interesting psychology experiment, which illustrates the power of unconscious interpretation, subjects were asked to put on spectacles which inverted their image of the world. For the first few days they were completely disoriented and saw everything as being upside down. But, interestingly, their brains soon flipped the images round so that they saw the world the right way up again. When the spectacles were removed at the end of the experiment they again experienced everything as upside down for a while until their vision returned to normal.

In fact, we are constantly making all kinds of unconscious inferences about what we experience. For example, your image in the bathroom mirror is actually about half the size of your head; but when you stumble out of bed in the morning and look at yourself in the mirror, you never have the impression that your head has shrunk in the night. It always *looks* the right size. Similarly, if someone walks towards you from the other end of a corridor, the image on your retina steadily expands, but you do not see them as slowly inflating like a balloon. As far as you are concerned, they remain the same size.

More generally, although vision is simply a matter of light of various wavelengths falling on your retina, you do not experience the world as so many blobs of colour. You never, for example, have to think to yourself 'Ah, those patches of colour over there must be a desk, and these patches must be someone's face.' You just see the world of familiar everyday objects. Sadly, however, some people who have suffered brain damage experience a condition known as **visual agnosia** in which they lose the ability to interpret what they see. To find out more about this condition, read the reading resource on pages 108–110.

Selectivity of perception

Apart from visual illusions, another reason for being cautious about what our senses tell us is that perception is *selective*. A vast amount of data is constantly flooding in to our senses, and our minds would overload if we were consciously aware of everything. So we only notice some things in our perceptual field and overlook others. The selectivity of perception can be seen as a generalisation of the figure-ground phenomenon mentioned above. Certain aspects of a situation engage our attention and 'stand out', and the rest fade away into a more or less

indeterminate background. For example, if we are having a conversation at school, I may notice your facial expression, yet have no conscious awareness of the picture on the wall behind you; or I may hear what you are saying, yet be oblivious to the ticking of the clock, or the quiet hum of the computer. While the light reflected from the picture affects my eyes, and the air vibrations caused by the clock and the computer hit my ears, my conscious mind treats these things as the background against which what I am interested in stands out.

If we ask what kind of stimuli we usually notice, intensity and contrast are two important factors. The ticking clock may sometimes go unheard, but you would hear if a bomb exploded in the building next door. Drop a small object on a patterned carpet and it can sometimes be hard to find again; but a tiny drop of blood on a white carpet will be immediately apparent. For good evolutionary reasons, we are also sensitive to moving objects. If you work at a desk by a window, your attention may suddenly be caught by something which makes you look up without quite knowing why – only to realise a second later that there is a distant bird passing over the trees. Since it may be moving towards you, such an object represents a potential threat and you therefore notice it.

What you see also depends on various subjective factors such as interest and mood. Your interests can be thought of as filters which determine what shows up as you scan the world around you. If three friends go for a walk in the countryside, one may focus mainly on nature and the variety of the wildlife; a second may attend to what his friends are wearing and talking about; and a third may notice very little because her mind is on something else. The following question, which I owe to an anonymous colleague, shows how our perspective on something affects the way we see it.

- ?** Take one of the following phenomena and describe how it might be seen through the eyes of the following people:
- A child dying in poverty as seen by a doctor, an economist, a social worker, the child's father.
 - A sunset as seen by a religious figure, a physicist, a painter, a farmer.
 - A tree as seen by a biologist, a logger, an environmentalist, a native American.

As the pattern of our interests changes, so does what we perceive. It is striking that if your family buys a new car you will probably start seeing cars of the same model and colour everywhere. Similarly, if a woman becomes pregnant, she begins noticing pregnant women wherever she goes.

Our feelings and emotions also shape and colour our perceptions, and when you are in a good mood you see the world in quite a different way to when you are in a bad mood. While an optimist sees a glass as half-full, a pessimist sees the same glass as half-empty. An emotion such as love can have a particularly strong effect on our perception. When you fall in love with someone you may unconsciously project your dreams and fantasies onto them so that they seem to possess every imaginable

perfection. If you later fall out of love, you may look at your 'ex' and wonder what you ever saw in them. Perhaps not surprisingly, it has been said that at the beginning of a relationship you tend to notice the things you have in common with someone, and at the end of a relationship you tend to notice the things that make you different. Our perception can also be distorted by fear. If you are alone on a dark and stormy night you may be frightened by sounds that you wouldn't normally notice. As a Persian proverb has it, 'He who has been bitten by a snake fears a piece of string.'

- ?**
- Take one of the following and explain how education and training can affect what we perceive:
 - A biologist looking down a microscope
 - A dentist looking at an X-ray
 - A professional wine taster
 - A lifeguard
 - An artist
 - To what extent do you think that the culture you come from affects the way in which you see the world?
 - In what emotional state do you think we see the world with the greatest clarity and objectivity?

Seeing and believing

At the start of this chapter, I quoted the saying that 'seeing is believing' but, since our beliefs and expectations can affect the way we see things, it might sometimes be more accurate to say that 'believing is seeing'. Here are three examples from different subject areas of the way in which our beliefs can affect our perception.

- Science.** In the nineteenth century some scientists speculated that an undiscovered planet – which they christened Vulcan – existed between Mercury and the sun. With this belief in mind, some astronomers claimed to have seen Vulcan through their telescopes. But it turned out that no such planet exists.
- History.** 'Bloody Sunday' is an infamous day in the history of Northern Ireland. On 30 January 1972 there was a violent confrontation between British troops and Catholic demonstrators which left thirteen Catholics dead. According to the British soldiers, they came under attack from terrorist elements and returned fire. But Catholic witnesses said the army opened fire on a peaceful demonstration without provocation. Perhaps one of the two sides was lying; but it is equally possible that, as a result of the 'fog of battle', each side genuinely believed its own version of events.
- Art.** In the visual arts, people have a tendency to draw and paint, not what they see, but what they think is there. For example, in antiquity some artists portrayed horses with eyelashes on the upper and lower lids of their eyes even though horses in fact have eyelashes only on their upper lids.

? We are all very good at seeing only what we want to see. Can you give some examples of the way in which our beliefs affect the way we see things?

Eye-witness testimony

The fallibility of perception not only is of theoretical interest but also has important implications in the real world. In criminal trials, juries tend to put a great deal of faith in eye-witness testimony, and such evidence can determine whether or not a person is found guilty. However, according to psychologists the uncorroborated evidence of a single witness should be treated with great caution. In recent years, a number of cases have come to light of people convicted of crimes on the basis of eye-witness accounts that subsequent DNA testing showed they could not have committed. To see just how unreliable eye-witnesses can be, read the article called 'Blind to change' in the reading resources at the end of this chapter.

What emerges from recent research is that the eye is not a camera and visual memories are not photographs that can be universally relied on to give an accurate record of what we have seen. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that every time we remember something, we *reconstruct* it.

Furthermore, it is easy to confuse the *source* of your memories. For example, if you think back to your childhood, you may be unsure whether some of your memories are really memories of the events in question, or whether your parents have told you some stories so many times that you *think* you remember them. Similar confusions can undermine the reliability of eye-witness evidence. Studies have shown that witnesses who have previously been shown mugshots of possible suspects are more likely to pick one of these people out in an identity parade than witnesses who have been shown nothing beforehand.

? Imagine you witness a violent crime and get a brief but clear glimpse of the assailant. What confidence would you have that you could correctly identify one of the following three men?



Figure 4.9 Suspects

Distinguishing appearance from reality

Although perception is an important source of knowledge, our discussion has shown that there are at least three reasons for treating it with caution:

- 1 we may misinterpret what we see
- 2 we may fail to notice something
- 3 we may misremember what we have seen.

However, we must not get carried away with sceptical doubts and conclude that we can *never* trust our senses. After all, we take some things to be illusions only relative to other things that we assume to be true. For example, I can say that the three men in Figure 4.1 are *really* the same height only because I trust my senses when I measure them. If I were uniformly suspicious, I could not even trust the evidence which tells me that some of my perceptions are illusions.

How, then, do we distinguish between appearance and reality in everyday life?

Confirmation by another sense

One way to distinguish appearance from reality is to use a second sense to confirm the evidence of a first. If something looks like an apple and tastes like an apple, then it seems reasonable to conclude that it *really is* an apple. If, on the other hand, there is a conflict between two of our senses, then we may suspect that we are experiencing an illusion. For example, if a pencil is half-immersed in a beaker of water it appears bent to the eye, but if you run your hand along it you can feel that it is straight. So you are likely to conclude that the pencil is not *really* bent but merely *looks* bent.

If you want to be awkward, you might ask why in this example we have privileged our sense of touch over that of sight. Why not say instead that when I half-immerses a pencil in water, it bends, but I suffer a peculiar tactile illusion that makes me think it is still straight? The answer is that, as a matter of brute fact, touch takes priority in determining the reality of something. If you are unsure whether the wall in front of you is real or an illusion, try banging your head against it. If you think that you may be hallucinating the fire in the hearth, try putting your hand in it. For common sense at least, pain is proof enough of the reality of an object. In short, if it hurts then it is real.

Coherence

A second way of distinguishing appearance from reality is in terms of coherence. If you see something that does not 'fit in' with your overall experience of the world, then the chances are that you are mistaken. If a drunk sees a pig flying over the rooftops one evening, he is unlikely to believe what he saw when he is sober again. Since pigs lack the aerodynamic wherewithal to fly, it makes more sense to dismiss a flying pig as an alcohol-induced hallucination.

Coherence also explains why in the pencil example it makes more sense to say that we suffer a visual rather than a tactile illusion. The point is that, while the hypothesis that objects bend every time you half-immerses them in water contradicts the known laws of physics, we can explain why they appear to bend in terms of physical theories about the refraction of light.

Independent testimony

A final criterion for distinguishing appearance from reality is the testimony of other people. We saw above that the evidence of a single eye-witness cannot always be taken at face value; but the credibility of such evidence is greatly increased if it is confirmed by other people. If dozens of independent witnesses claim to have seen a plane crash into a building, then, unless you are in the grip of a conspiracy theory, there is a high – ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ – probability that such testimony is true.

To summarise our discussion, we can say that, while our senses are liable to error, we are in many cases able to correct our mistakes by appealing to such things as a second sense, coherence and the testimony of other people. Of course, we can never be certain that we are right but, as we saw in Chapter 2, knowledge requires something less than certainty. Perception may be fallible, but in many cases it is a reliable enough foundation on which to base our knowledge claims.

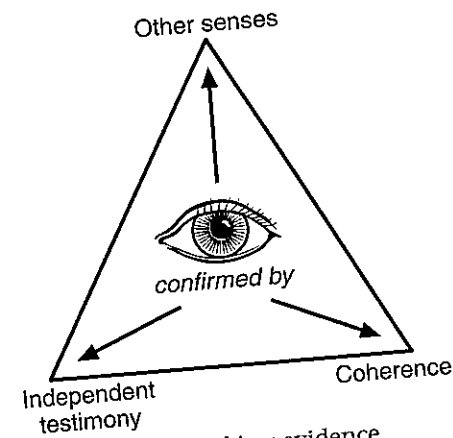


Figure 4.10 Checking evidence

Ultimate reality

The final topic we need to look at in this chapter is a philosophical one concerning the extent to which perception gives us knowledge of ultimate reality. Since this is quite an abstract topic, let us begin by saying something more about the psychology of perception.

Psychology of perception

While our five senses give us valuable information about the world, they each have a limited range of sensitivity, and capture only certain kinds of data in their net. For example, our eyes are sensitive only to light of a certain wavelength, and we are unable to see such things as ultraviolet and infrared which lie beyond the visible spectrum. Similarly, our ears can detect only certain kinds of sound and our noses only certain kinds of smell; and dogs can hear and smell things that we are completely unaware of. Some animals even have senses that are completely different from our own. For example, bats navigate by a system of echo-location, which gives them what might be called ‘acoustic vision’. They emit high-frequency sounds and are then able to determine the shape, size and distance of surrounding objects by the echo that is reflected back to their ears.

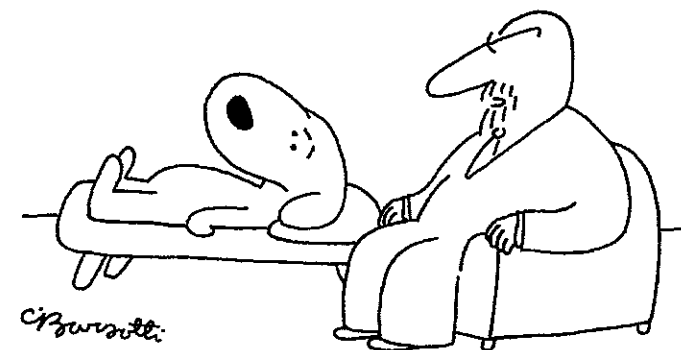


Figure 4.11

With the above points in mind, imagine if we had evolved so that our eyes were sensitive to light in a different range of wavelengths, or that we used echo-location rather than vision. Our experience of the world would presumably be very different from what it is now. This may lead us to wonder what reality is like once we strip away the interpretation that our sense-organs impose on it.

What is really out there?

To explore the question of what is really ‘out there’, let us consider the following three examples.

1 Pain, taste and colour

If by accident you burn your hand in a fire, you think of the resulting pain as being in your hand rather than in the fire. You do not think that the pain is somehow in the fire independent of your experience of it. The pain that you feel is surely nothing more than the subjective experience that results from the interaction between your hand and the fire.

Take another example: if you drink a can of cola it tastes sweet. Does the sweetness exist in the cola, or does it exist only in your mouth? Well, again, you would probably agree that the sweetness is simply a subjective experience that results from the interaction between your taste buds and the cola.



Galileo (1564–1642) once said ‘The tickle is not in the feather.’ Explain what you think he meant by this. What relevance does it have to our discussion?

While you may be happy with the idea that pain and taste are merely subjective experiences, you probably feel less comfortable with this way of thinking when it comes to such things as colours. Surely the sky is blue and snow is white and grass is green? Well, for *us* all of these things are of course true. But if we apply the same

reasoning that we used in the cola example, we seem forced to admit that the green is no more in the grass than the sweetness is in the cola or the pain is in the fire. The green that you see when you look at the grass is, once again, simply the result of the interaction between your eyes and the underlying structure of the grass. And if our eyes had evolved differently and were sensitive to light of a different wavelength we would not see grass as green at all. We seem to be pushed towards the unsettling conclusion that the world in itself has no colour at all – reality is colourless.

2 The tree in the forest

Consider the well-known question 'If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?' The common-sense answer is to say that of course it makes a sound. Falling trees are noisy things. You may conjure up in your mind a picture of a huge tree falling and the tremendous crash it makes as it falls to the ground. But if you think that sound is nothing more than the effect of air vibrations on our ears, then it would seem to follow that if there are no ears in the neighbourhood, then the tree does not make a sound.

One way of trying to resolve the above puzzle is to make a distinction between two senses of the word 'sound'. Sound₁, we might say, is *physical* sound – i.e. the vibrations in the air that are caused by things like falling trees. Sound₂, by contrast, is *experienced* sound – the actual crash, bang, wallop that we hear when trees hit the ground. We can now say that if a tree falls in a forest and there is no one there to hear it, there is sound₁ but no sound₂.

This solves the problem, but it may leave you with a somewhat eerie feeling. For it means that, if the phone goes after everyone has left my apartment in the morning, there may be vibrations in the air, but there is no distinctive 'ring-ring' sound. The most we can say is that if I were in my apartment then I would hear the phone ring. More dramatically, this way of thinking means that, millions of years ago before the emergence of life on Earth, our planet was a silent place. Breaking waves and storms and volcanoes set up vibrations in the air, but there were no crashes or bangs or wallops. And if right now we were to surgically remove the ears from all sentient beings, the world would again revert to silence.

Now consider another question: if a rose flowers and dies in an uninhabited garden and there is no one there to see it, does it have a colour? We might again distinguish between physical and experienced colour, and say that in the former sense it has a colour, and in the latter sense it does not. This seems to lead us to the conclusion that, before there were any eyes in the world, the sky was not blue, and the roses were not red, and the grass was not green – at least not in the experiential sense of these words.

The examples we have considered above suggest that we cannot say that colours, sounds and tastes exist out there independent of our experience of them. So we may begin to wonder whether *anything* can be said to exist independent of our experience of it.

3 The tables in the classroom

As a final example, consider the tables in your classroom at school. After you leave the room at the end of the day, how do you know the tables are still there? If you had nothing better to do, you could sneak back to school in the evening and take a look. I am confident that you would find the tables quietly sitting there just as you left them. But how do you know the tables are still there when no one is looking at them? (This is similar to the child's question: 'How do you know the light goes out when you close the fridge door?')

This may sound like a stupid question, and common sense will of course say that unobserved tables look much the same as observed tables. But how do you *know*? Perhaps tables only behave like decent, law-abiding tables when we are there to keep an eye on them; and perhaps when no one is around they dance around the room and turn somersaults.

You might think that there is a conclusive way to put an end to such surreal speculations. All you have to do is set up a video camera in the classroom, switch it on before you go home for the evening, and leave it running overnight. You will produce the most boring movie ever made: *Tables! The Motion Picture* – a movie in which absolutely nothing happens. This surely proves that unobserved tables behave in the same way as tables that are observed. But in fact your use of the video has not solved the problem, but merely relocated it. For the question now arises: 'How do you know that the images stay on the film when you are not watching it?'

This discussion may confirm your suspicion that philosophers spend their time asking useless questions that have no practical value. Surely life is too short to worry about what tables do when there is no one around to see them? Who really cares? Although we may be unable to *prove* that tables behave in standard table-like ways when we are not around, perhaps all that really matters is that they behave like tables when we are around. Perhaps we should conclude that what tables do in their spare time is no concern of ours.

Theories of reality

There are three different theories about the relationship between perception and reality: (1) common-sense realism; (2) scientific realism; (3) phenomenism.

1 Common-sense realism

This is the common-sense idea, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that the way we perceive the world mirrors the way the world is. However, since what we perceive is determined in part by the nature of our sense-organs, we have seen that there are good reasons for rejecting common-sense realism.



In your own words, outline the main arguments against common-sense realism.

2 Scientific realism

According to scientific realism, the world exists as an independent reality, but it is very different from the way we perceive it. The physicist Sir Arthur Eddington (1882–1944) once compared the common-sense description of a table with the scientific description of it. According to common sense, a table has extension and colour, and is comparatively permanent and substantial. But the scientific table is quite different:

It does not belong to the world previously mentioned – that world which spontaneously appears around me when I open my eyes... My scientific table is mostly emptiness. Sparsely scattered in that emptiness are numerous electric charges rushing about with great speed; but their combined bulk amounts to less than a billionth of the bulk of the table itself. Notwithstanding its strange construction it turns out to be an entirely efficient table. It supports my writing paper as satisfactorily as [an ordinary table] for when I lay the paper on it the little electric particles with their headlong speed keep on hitting the underside, so that the paper is maintained in shuttlecock fashion at a nearly steady level. If I lean upon this table I shall not go through; or, to be strictly accurate, the chance of my scientific elbow going through my scientific table is so excessively small that it can be neglected in practical life.

[*The Nature of the Physical World*, London: Dent, 1935]

This brief description draws attention to the strangeness of the scientific picture of reality. The familiar, comfortable, sensuous world of our everyday experience vanishes and is replaced by a colourless, soundless, odourless realm of atoms whizzing around in empty space.

3 Phenomenalism

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned a philosophical position known as empiricism according to which all knowledge must ultimately be based on experience. If we take this idea seriously, then we seem to arrive at a more radical position known as phenomenalism. According to this view, *matter is simply 'the permanent possibility of sensation'*, and it makes no sense to say that the world exists independent of our experience of it. A phenomenalist would take the statement 'There are tables in the classroom at school' to mean not that the tables are in some deep sense there but simply that if you go to the classroom you will have various table-experiences. The Irish philosopher George Berkeley (1685–1753) summed up the phenomenalist position with the famous slogan 'To be is to be perceived.'

Despite its counter-intuitive nature, phenomenalism seems to follow logically from the idea that all knowledge must ultimately be based on experience. For, if this is true, then we obviously cannot know what the world is like independent of our experience of it. This does not mean that the world does *not* exist independent of our experience of it – for that, too, is to make a claim that goes beyond the limits of experience. The point is rather that, beyond our experience of reality, there is simply nothing to be said. Understood in this way, phenomenalism could be seen as a call to humility; for it insists that we can only know the world from our distinctively human perspective and have no right to pontificate about the nature of ultimate reality.



- 1 If you believed in phenomenalism, what difference, if any, would it make to practical life?
- 2 Does it bother you to think that we cannot know anything about what the universe is like independent of our experience of it?

What should we believe?

The three theories of reality we have discussed can be summarised in the following three slogans.

Common-sense realism	'What you see is what is there'
Scientific realism	'Atoms in the void'
Phenomenalism	'To be is to be perceived'

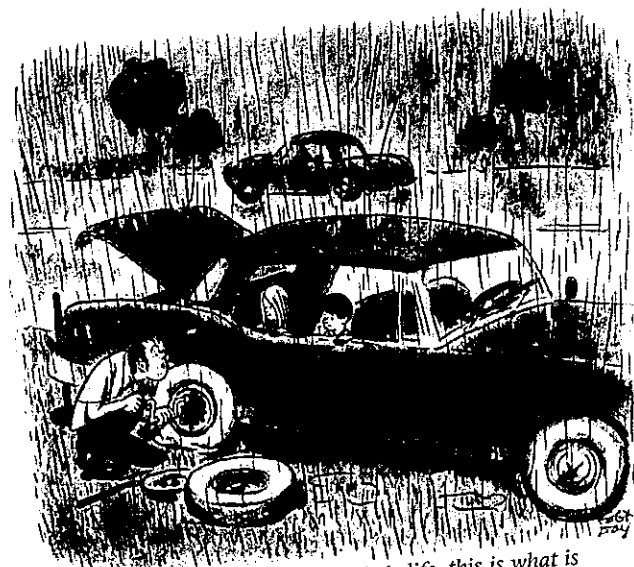
One interesting thing that comes out of our somewhat surreal discussion about the nature of ultimate reality is that if you push empiricism to its limits you end up with counter-intuitive conclusions. At this point you have a choice. You can either stick with empiricism and insist that we can know nothing about ultimate reality, or reject strict empiricism and insist that there is a world out there independent of our experience of it.

I suspect that deep down most people are realists about the existence of the world. Despite the doubts we have raised about realism, there are perhaps two ways of trying to rescue it:

- 1 Although you cannot prove the existence of an independently existing reality, you might argue that it is the most reasonable hypothesis to account for the regularity of our experience. If, for example, you light a fire and return some hours later to find only a pile of ashes, the simplest way to explain what happened is to say that the fire was burning continuously in your absence.
- 2 The vast majority of people have a strong intuition that the world exists independent of our perception of it. As our discussion of scientific realism has shown, it may be very different from our everyday picture of it, but most scientists are intuitive realists and believe that they are making discoveries about an independently existing reality.

Conclusion

We began this chapter by stressing that perception is an important way of knowing which plays a key role in most areas of knowledge. However, as our discussion has progressed we have seen that there is more to perception than meets the eye, and that we cannot simply take the evidence of our senses for granted. For not only do they sometimes deceive us, but they are also selective and can be distorted by our beliefs and prejudices. In everyday life, there are ways of distinguishing between appearance and reality, and moving towards a more accurate picture of the world.



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"Don't you understand? This is life, this is what is happening. We can't switch to another channel."

Figure 4.12

We can, for example, use a second sense to check up on a first, or appeal to the testimony of other people.

At a practical level, you would be mad to simply ignore the evidence of your senses. If you want to survive when you cross the road, it pays to go with the hypothesis that if something looks and sounds like a 20 tonne truck speeding towards you then it really is a 20 tonne truck. As a general rule of thumb, it probably makes sense to doubt our senses only if there are good reasons for doing so. Admittedly, perception cannot give us certainty but, as we saw in Chapter 2, knowledge requires something less than certainty. If the perceptual evidence is consistent with other ways of knowing, such as reason and intuition, then it is probably a good enough foundation for reliable knowledge.



Figure 4.13 Face: the image of Figure 4.7, clarified

Key points

- Our five senses are an important source of knowledge about the world; but rather than passively reflect reality, they actively structure it.
- Perception consists of two elements, sensation and interpretation, but we are often not consciously aware of the latter element.
- Looking at visual illusions can help make us aware of the role that interpretation plays in perception.
- Perception is selective and what we notice in a given environment is influenced by factors such as intensity, contrast, interest, mood and expectations.
- The fallibility of perception is relevant to issues in the real world such as eye-witness testimony in criminal trials.
- We usually distinguish between appearance and reality by using a second sense to confirm the evidence of the first, or by appealing to coherence or the testimony of other people.
- The way we experience the world is partly determined by the structure of our sense-organs.
- If we accept that pain and taste are subjective, we might conclude that colour and sound are also subjective.
- There are three main theories about the relationship between perception and reality: common-sense realism, scientific realism and phenomenalism.
- Despite sceptical doubts, the existence of the external world is the most reasonable hypothesis to account for the regularity of our experience.
- Although perception cannot give us certainty, if the evidence of our senses is consistent with what reason and intuition tell us, it can still provide a good foundation for reliable knowledge.

Terms to remember

common-sense realism
empiricism
figure and ground
phenomenalism

scientific realism
sensation
visual agnosia
visual grouping

Further reading

Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (Vintage, 1995). In this book, Diane Ackerman takes us on a rich journey through each of the five senses. She skilfully weaves insights from the sciences, arts and personal experience into a fascinating synthesis.

V. S. Ramachandran, *Phantoms in the Brain* (Quill, 1999), Chapter 4: 'The Zombie in the Brain'. V. S. Ramachandran is a neuroscientist who has studied brain-damaged patients. In this chapter he focuses on a strange condition known as 'blindsight' to analyse and speculate about the nature of perception.